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SUBJECT: KABARDINO-BALKARIA: AFTERMATH OF OCTOBER ATTACKS

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Classified By: Minister Counselor for Political Affairs Kirk Augustine.
Reason 1.4 (b, d)

¶1. (C) Summary: Few local officials in Kabardino-Balkaria are willing to talk about the October 13-14 attacks in Nalchik by Islamic extremists against government, law enforcement and security sites. Those who did during a January 25-26 visit to the Republic by Embassy officers cited joblessness as the main factor in extremism, and swiftly changed the subject to economic assistance. Parliamentarians viewed questions on the attacks as criticism (though we couched them as part of a shared problem), and responded with attacks on the U.S. Joblessness remains a major issue; despite an innovative team at the Ministry of Economic Development and Trade, Soviet-era thinking dominates this field in the Republic. End summary.

The Mufti: Victory

¶2. (C) During a January 25-26 visit to Kabardino-Balkaria, we found only the Republic's Chief Mufti Anas Pshikhachev willing to talk about the October 13-14 attacks that left at least 136 dead, with 91 of them identified as militants. Pshikhachev saw the participation of "only" a couple of hundred locals in the violence as a victory for moderate Islam. He and other official imams had worked with youths sympathetic to the extremist cause, persuading many of them away from armed action. Pshikhachev termed the participants "unemployed youths;" he dodged the question of whether they were in fact mostly university students. He said the attackers were well-financed: they drove new cars; and when the corpses of two attackers - "boys I knew" - were stored for a while in Pshikhachev's gleaming new mosque, their pockets yielded new Russian passports for international travel and large amounts of American dollars.

¶3. (C) Pshikhachev said there was no persecution of Islam in Kabardino-Balkaria. He had seen the press reports of mosque closings, but assured us that no mosques had been closed; 153 were functioning throughout the Republic. (Comment: Technically, this may be true. However, in certain neighborhoods mosques are reportedly allowed to open only during actual hours of prayer and are padlocked the rest of the day. End Comment.) Pshikhachev said Nalchik's Higher Islamic School was one of the best in Russia, and some students studied abroad at al-Azhar in Cairo as well as in Damascus, Riyadh and Malaysia. Pshikhachev himself had studied four years in Syria followed by five in Libya. Of his studies, Pshikhachev said only that he and his fellow non-Arabs were incensed by a class in Tripoli on "Arabo-Islamic culture." As far as they were concerned, Islamic culture was one thing, Arab culture another, and the Arabs had no special claim to Islam, he said.

Parliament: Bad U.S., Bad Georgia

¶4. (C) Other government officials and parliamentarians refused to comment on the October attacks beyond asserting that the organizations behind them had been "neutralized." They then changed the subject. Members of the Parliamentary Presidium (the 22 committee chairs and deputy chairs who sit on a permanent basis) attacked the U.S. for opposing the appointment of provincial governors and limitations on NGO activity. "Everyone here understands the need for such measures," one Member said. "Why can't you in the West understand?" They linked these to U.S. involvement in Iraq and the Balkans, alleging U.S. unwillingness to let other countries practice democracy in their own way (we made suitable reply to such references to democracy a la Saddam and Milosevic).

¶5. (C) Most striking during our conversation with the Parliamentary Presidium and others was the strong local opposition to U.S. support for Georgia. Kabardians had streamed to Abkhazia in 1992 to fight against Georgia alongside their ethnic cousins, the Abkhaz. (Comment: They were also fighting alongside Shamil Basayev, a fact they would sooner forget these days. End comment.) They said they would do so again if the Georgians carried out their "warlike" schemes. A Parliamentarian warned that a renewal of fighting would pull in Turkey and Russia, igniting a region-wide conflagration.

Government: Jobs, Jobs, Jobs

¶6. (C) Government officials, in contrast, turned the

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conversation to jobs, citing unemployment as the most significant factor contributing to radicalism. The Soviet government had founded "high-tech" defense factories in Kabardino-Balkaria (as in neighboring republics) in the 1970s. All of those factories were interlinked, all were dependent on orders from the Defense Ministry, and all were now defunct. Unemployment - and drug use, alcoholism and extremism - were reportedly even higher in the villages now than in Nalchik.

¶7. (C) Kabardino-Balkaria showed a curious dichotomy in economic thinking. The Ministry of Economic Development and Trade boasted young, smart, modern thinkers implementing their own innovative programs for computer literacy, business incubation and micro-finance - and eager for more programs from the U.S. Other officials, however, were stuck on the Republic's presumed tourist potential, which they see as re-attracting Soviet-era workers to cramped and primitive spas to take the waters. (In fairness, Mt. Elbrus -- Europe's highest peak -- could attract more skiers if enormous sums were invested in infrastructure, though today's Russians prefer the Alps. And climbers continue to flock to the Bezengi Wall and other Meccas of alpinism.) In the mountain mining center of Tyrnyauz, the provincial administration center still sported a statue of Lenin in the lobby, and its chief bemoaned the loss of jobs at the town's tungsten and molybdenum mines and processing plant. He castigated this generation's lack of respect for hard work, even though the workers were earning only a "medium" salary of 6500 rubles (USD 232) per month. He let slip that this meant an "effective" salary of 3500 rubles (USD 125). He noted, however, that the town's processing plant had just been acquired by oligarch Oleg Deripaska's Bazovyy Element conglomerate, and would soon be refining two million tons per year (though the capacity was 8.5 million tons). He lamented that the plant would need a staff of only 540.

Comment

18. (C) We were unable to visit the Nalchik neighborhood of Volnyy Aul, reportedly a "wahhabist" stronghold; nor did we get the chance to speak to anyone who would shed more light on the attacks which left numerous bullet holes still evident in buildings in the center of the city. The parts of Nalchik we saw were calm and showed no heightened security presence. We have heard that the attack came as a complete surprise to the security services, and that had a detachment of fighters not been engaged - by pure chance - before it reached the town, the fighting might have been even more serious. We have also heard, including from locals outside the Republic, that there are still large, strong and well-organized groups of extremists in Kabardino-Balkaria. But inside the Republic, the public face is one of denial.

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